MONATLICHER INFORMATIONSBRIEF ÜBER EVANGELISATION

A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

Number 4

April 1958

The author of this letter is the Rev. E.H. Robertson, who is conducting a study on "The Place and Use of the Bible in the Life of the Churches". This letter describes some of the ways in which a renewed use of the Bible is affecting evangelism.

HOUSE CHURCHES IN EUROPE

The Church in many parts of the world has discovered the technique of the small group as a means of influencing those outside. The small group has sometimes been the discussion group and sometimes the House Church or the House Meeting. It has proved a means of evangelism as well as a method of deepening the spiritual life of the local church.

Particularly in Scotland the influence of the Iona Community, and more recently the Tell Scotland Movement, has encouraged this. The Church of Scotland has made serious efforts to become a parish church again and has felt its responsibility for all who live in the parish. This has led to Elders Meetings, which are for all those who live in a specific part of the parish. These Elders Meetings sooner or later become Bible study groups, but they insist upon Bible study with a difference. In particular they try to avoid the academic. The main concern is always to serve the area and Bible study has to be seen in that context. There has been a strong resistance to the idea of a pious group studying the Bible because it has been seen that there is a danger there that the members may simply enjoy themselves, imagining that they are doing something good and holy in having long discussions about the Bible. The whole House Church movement in Scotland began by being firmly related to practical service, but it has long since spread into evangelism. When you begin by helping your neighbour you soon realise that the greatest help you can give to him lies in presenting the Gospel in such a way that he will accept what it offers.

The use of the Bible in these House Meetings is particularly interesting. Many parishes in Scotland report that they have tried Bible study groups and always there have been discouraging results: sooner or later people have lost interest. One reason was because the old type of Bible study accentuated

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educational differences. All the talking was done by those who had been better educated and who were used to discussions on the academic level. When House Churches or Elders House Meetings were started many said they would not come if there was to be any Bible study. So the groups started as concerns for the neighbourhood with almost an embargo on Bible study. But the needs soon showed that they could be met only by spiritual means. It was not enough to discuss how you could help your neighbour materially. Those who came into the groups simply for the fellowship which they offered developed a desire to know more about Christianity, and then the whole group turned to the Bible. The result is that in some groups which started by being hostile to any idea of Bible study there are long courses on Amos and intensive discussions on the Epistle to the Ephesians now going on. House Churches thus start for a variety of reasons.

In wartime Britain, with blackout and bombing, it was often very difficult to gather people together in large numbers, especially in the evening. For this reason many churches dropped their mid-week prayer meetings and other organisations, and in their place organised a number of informal meetings in the people's homes. My own parish in a suburb of Luton had 10 of these informal meetings, specially located so that everyone could get to a meeting in a few minutes from his own home. This meant that he was never very far from home. Two were held each evening, mostly under lay leadership, and many people who had never been to church - or at least had not been for a long time - came along to these little informal house churches. That was the picture of many parishes in Britain during the war, and people found that the small group gave a possibility of fellowship, of getting to know each other, that was not found in the larger gatherings in church. When the war was over and there was no longer need to make these special arrangements because people could quite easily and safely go to a large gathering, some people missed the small informal groups. In many parishes they have continued, now for quite other reasons.

One of the most notable of these parishes is the parish of Halton in Leeds. The vicar is convinced that these gatherings help to restore the true life of the Church. He has various types of House Churches, intensive for the deepening of spiritual understanding, and extensive for the outreach and broad linking of the Church's teaching with the outside world. He has found these House Churches so important that he has cultivated a whole network of them and has abandoned his Sunday evening service in order to help them function better. "There are some things", he says, "which God can do with a small group that he can not do with a large congregation." Something like this system of House Churches is springing up everywhere in Europe today, and for a variety of reasons. Small groups have always been a part of the Church's organisation but there is a special need for them today; for one of the most obvious breakdowns in Church-life in Western Europe is the breakdown of fellowship. In some churches it seems to have broken down altogether. Members hardly know each other and certainly no longer feel that intense relation which was common in the early Church.

One of the areas which I studied in Europe, the area around Amsterdam, clearly illustrated this. I visited a number of very conservative and strictly Reformed churches - what are sometimes humorously called "The double Reformed churches" - in Amsterdam. The leaders of this Church were deeply concerned about their young people, especially those young people who came up from country areas to work in the city. Since the war many thousands of young men

have left the villages of the Netherlands and gone to work in the industrial centres. They have there lived in workers flats and they tried to make some kind of contact with the churches. If they have been used to going to church back home in the village then their first visit in Amsterdam was often to a church service. And there they have been disappointed. These young lads were lost in the churches. They came to worship, heard the familiar hymns and the familiar message, but they were lonely. At home in their village everyone had known them, but here in Amsterdam, surrounded by crowds, they were quite alone. There was no way of getting the Sunday congregation to receive these young men and to help them feel at home, because the tendency was for the young man to come, sit in the back of the church and slip out quickly afterwards. The only answer was to organise a network of House Churches where these young men would meet people and have true fellowship - where, in fact, they would be noticed and looked after.

Similar problems have found similar answers in all parts of Europe. There have, of course, been other reasons for starting House Churches. Some reasons are as old as those which led Priscilla and Aquila of St. Paul's day to make their home into Church. Devout Christians everywhere want to gather and talk about their faith to kindred souls, and to read their Bibles together. Sometimes it is simply a matter of trying to weld a neighbourhood into a community, and this is particularly true of suburbs. In many of the suburbs of Oslo there are today neighbourhood groups, where Christians who live in neighbouring streets can come together regularly to help construct a community in their area. Whatever be the reason for the small group it soon becomes a Bible study group and guidance is sought. Of course, all such groups can not be led by the minister, and it is not good that they should be. The experience of wartime Britain was that many of these groups profitted from lay leadership. In Amsterdam three of the leading scholars of the church have compiled a small booklet of specimen Bible discussions, showing how ordinary people without a theological training, can direct a general discussion of Bible passages. The booklet is called appropriately, "According to the strength of every member".

In Norway the neighbourhood groups, which have been strongly supported by Bishop Berggrav, have a handy commentary and a concordance which is simple to use. I found these neighbourhood groups in Norway particularly good. One that I visited, in a suburb of Oslo, was made up entirely of housewives and was led by one of them. It was not always the same leader, and the group met in different homes. They went round the neighbourhood and whoever was the hostess for the evening would lead the Bible study. The women were a mixed group, less a dozen of them, and only two could have been called intellectuals. They met for refreshment and general talk about the problems of the neighbourhood, and then moved off to another part of the room for Bible study. There the passage for study was read through and the leader began by referring to the commentary, and explained what she made of the passage. They had a simple method of marking their verses with little signs: an arrow if a verse struck them; a question mark if they didn't understand it; and a star or a flame if it particularly appealed to them. This simple method enabled the least intellectual of the group to go through the passage and say which verse puzzled her or which verse impressed her. They all prepared the passage beforehand and everybody seemed to have something to say, even if it was only to describe her impressions of the passage. As I listened these women uncovered the meaning of the passage and it really spoke to them. They had difficulties, of course, but they got far more out of it than they

could possibly have got alone, or even listening to a learned sermon. What they got was their own. There are many such groups in Oslo - housewives, men, married couples, youth, student and mixed groups. I was able to get the leaders of these groups together before I left and to hear from them the various problems that they have faced with this method. They have been going for some years now and have seen many results. They have seen strong informed groups grow up in the churches and strengthen both the witness of the church and its activities. Their chief difficulty seems to be with the Old Testament... a difficulty which unfortunately they solve by leaving out the Old Testament altogether. Groups like this lose a great deal by ignoring the Old Testament, but one can well understand their difficulties. There are so few commentaries which help people to read the Old Testament in a simple way and without complications. Of course there's a danger in all this movement of House Churches. In some parts of Europe they have become something of a menace. They have provided places where intensive and very holy people could become more intensive and more holy, separate from their fellow Christians and from those whom they regard as fallen men. Some have been in opposition to the minister and have constantly criticised his work. They have set themselves up as judges. Fortunately such groups are not the majority, they are few and generally speaking they are dying out. The growing House Church Movement today is largely a search for fellowship or a method of reaching a wider circle.

In the Soviet Zone of Germany where, more than in most parts of the world, there is a great difficulty in persuading men to come to church, the small group has sometimes shown a way. In that part of the Zone which borders on Czechoslovakia among the mineworkers of the Ertz mountains, I found that while men would not go to church, they would meet in barracks and in homes to discuss and study the Bible. There seems to be a real awakening in such groups. I have heard similar stories from those who have spent long years in Russian prisoner-of-war camps. Men are looking for something and they are half-persuaded that they may find it in the Bible. The small group gives them the opportunity to ask their questions and to share their problems with men like themselves. Of course, it is not only manual workers who find these groups necessary. The complexities of modern life dismay all classes. In France and in Germany there are growing numbers of groups of intellectuals who are estranged from the churches but who are prepared to seek out those answers which the Bible can give to their questions. This generation has seen the re-establishing of the Bible as intellectually respectable. Such men are not likely to be impressed by Dr. Keller's attempt to show that the Bible is historically correct, nor greatly moved by the popular newspaper articles, but they are beginning to feel the immense spiritual power of the Bible and wish to draw from it. Groups of writers, artists, teachers and such like are meeting more or less regularly in many parts of France and Germany. Their small groups are not exactly House Churches and there is always the danger that they may develop into a no-church movement - as such a movement has developed in Japan - but those I have attended seem to me to be similar to the simple House Churches of Amsterdam and Oslo and Leeds. All are seeking from the small group a fellowship and a knowledge. The fellowship looks like a desperate attempt to restore human relations in a terrifying and impersonal world. The knowledge is that which can be tapped from the spiritual resources of the Bible. The question now remains whether there are the people in the churches sufficiently clearminded and sufficiently open to let those who are seeking discover the real message of the Bible and hear its voice clearly, untrammelled by Church procedure.